# HOT bird sightings on COLD Christmas bird counts

Column 406

What do Horned Lark, White-throated Sparrow and a howling wind have in common? The answer is... Whitehorse Christmas Bird Count. Each year in December, bird counts are done in several Yukon communities as well as communities throughout North America.

At the Mayo Christmas Bird Count, count coordinator Mark O'Donoghue was the sole outdoor observer, starting the day at -43° C and walking 15 km searching for hearty feathered creatures as the temperature dropped to -45° C. Mark and seven volunteer participants watching out their windows at backyard bird feeders tallied a total of 10 species, including two Dark-eyed Juncos. Juncos usually winter in southern Canada and the United States, but a few winter sightings at bird feeders have been noted in recent years in southern Yukon.

Horned Lark, Whitehorse Christmas Bird Count
(photo: Cameron D. Eckert)

In Haines Junction, high winds kept many of the 12 or so volunteer bird counters indoors, peering out windows at birds frequenting their feeders. "Birds were not moving around much" says David Henry. Of note in the Haines Junction count were Willow Ptarmigan seen at lower elevations this year than in past Christmas Bird Counts, and two Red-breasted Nuthatches.

The Watson Lake count was done by 14 volunteers in relatively mild weather, including some rain later in the day. Coordinator Ted Murphy-Kelly reports that one of the volunteers spotted 10 Snow Buntings just north of the town on the Robert Campbell Highway. Redpolls were well represented, "the largest flock was 75, and one backyard watcher reported 32 at their feeder" says Murphy-Kelly. Two Black-billed Magpie were also spotted -- although common on other Christmas Bird Counts in southern Yukon, they are seldom seen on the Watson Lake count.

The Marsh Lake count was pretty quiet according to coordinator Helmut Grünberg. Ten volunteers (including 1 year old Seth) turned out to tally a notable number of Spruce Grouse (10) and mergansers (9), as well as a Dark-eyed Junco and a Bald Eagle. Several other common winter species were noted, although fewer in total numbers than last year. Goldeneye were "expected", but not seen, and Grünberg reports that, "with so much open water they could have been anywhere".

This year's Whitehorse count took place on Boxing Day at -22°C with a wind strong enough to freeze nose and ears. "I had to walk backwards for part of the area that I surveyed, and any time I used my binoculars had to hold my breath or they would fog up and become useless" said Wendy Nixon, coordinator of the Whitehorse bird count. In spite of the chill, 26 volunteers turned out in the Whitehorse area, and turned up a total of 28 different species. "That breaks the 1997 record of 27 species for our area, and includes 4 species that were totally unexpected" said Nixon.

Why these "unexpected" sightings?

Cameron Eckert, Conservation Biologist at Yukon Department of Environment says Whitehorse's record high species total can, in part, be attributed to two factors. First, a surge of rarities into the Yukon last summer followed by a spectacular fall migration produced numerous rare species throughout the region. Then, mild conditions in November and early December allowed a few of these rarities along with some common migrant species to linger into early winter. Species seen on the Whitehorse count which are normally found well south of the Yukon in winter were Green-winged Teal, Horned Lark, American Tree Sparrow, and White-throated Sparrow. The White-throated Sparrow would be rare in the Whitehorse area even in summer -- it is in southeast Yukon during the breeding season, but "normally" winters in the eastern and southern United States.

In past years, single winter rarities have appeared on Whitehorse counts, including Golden Eagle, Steller's Jay, American Robin, European Starling, White-crowned Sparrow, House Finch, Evening Grosbeak and House Sparrow.

You may ask -- what species "normally" appear on Christmas bird counts in the Yukon?

The list is surprisingly long. In recent years counts have included:

- Mallard
- Common Goldeneye
- Barrow's Goldeneye
- Common Merganser
- Bald Eagle
- Northern Goshawk
- Spruce Grouse
- Ruffed Grouse
- Willow Ptarmigan
- Rock Pigeon (although the Whitehorse population has dwindled)
- Northern Hawk Owl
- Great Horned Owl
- Downy Woodpecker
- Hairy Woodpecker
- Three-toed Woodpecker
- Black-backed Woodpecker
- Black-billed Magpie
- Gray Jay
- Common Raven
- Black-capped Chickadee
- Boreal Chickadee

- Mountain Chickadee
- Northern Shrike
- Red-Breasted Nuthatch
- American Dipper
- Bohemian Waxwing
- Dark-eyed Junco (very few)
- Red Crossbill
- Pine Grosbeak
- White-winged Crossbill
- Common Redpoll
- Hoary Redpoll

The Yukon Bird Club has generously agreed to cover the cost of participant fees to Bird Studies Canada for this year's Yukon counts.

For more information on Christmas Bird Counts, contact Wendy Nixon at Canadian Wildlife Service at (867) 667-3929.